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Joseph Conrad and British critics of colonialism

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad's African novella Heart of Darkness, written in 1898-99 was partly inspired by, but also anticipated, British critics—especially Roger Casement and E.D. Morel—of colonialism in the 'Congo Free State'. Casement and Morel revealed the hypocrisy of King Leopold II of the Belgians, who hid ruthless exploitation and genocide in the Congo under the cloak of a supposed civilizing mission. Conrad met Casement on a six-month visit to the Congo in 1890 and became a close friend. Morel learned of the 'nightmare' of the Congo from Casement, but was also inspired in his campaign for the Congo Reform Association by Conrad's novella. Conrad's sympathy for people oppressed by great powers was derived from his Polish background, but his anti-colonialism was modified by admiration for British imperial efficiency.

In this paper I discuss aspects of early British anti-colonial literature at the end of the nineteenth century. I will concentrate on the writings of three distinguished authors who expressed the most condemnation against the inhuman exploitation of Africans by Europeans in the Congo. These three writers are the Irish-born British diplomat Roger Casement, the French-born British journalist Edmund D. Morel, and the Polish-born English novelist Joseph Conrad.¹

In the prevailing atmosphere of the late Victorian era—racism and biological determinism, colonial expansion and imperial philosophy—the writing and pamphleteering of Conrad, Casement and Morel were quite exceptional. They condemned colonialism and showed a humane attitude towards the African victims of European imperialism.

In Britain, imperial expansion was then generally held to be in the interests of employment, markets, civilization, security and future greatness. The Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebration in 1897 was turned into a great imperial pageant. Empire sentiment and euphoria reached their zenith in the years 1898-99, when Conrad was writing his anti-colonial and anti-imperial *Heart of Darkness*.² In that African novella he described imperialism as robbery with violence, and as aggravated murder on a grand scale. His ideas were shared by Casement and Morel. Their works contributed greatly to the eventful downfall of the Leopoldian colonial system in the Congo.

Roger Casement, E. D. Morel and King Leopold's Congo

The Congo Free State was the creation of King Leopold II (1835-1910) of Belgium. Before he became the ruler of this state, he had already expressed his opinion on colonial issues. He regarded the inhabitants of the colonies merely as means of production rather than as human beings, though he

expressed a hope that 'civilization' might follow in the footsteps of forced labour.

Leopold II believed neither in the principles of free trade nor in humane treatment for African people. Before he acquired the Congo, he formed the supposedly philanthropic *Association Internationale Africaine*. This was soon transformed into a commercial undertaking known as the *Comité d'Etudes du Haut-Congo*, which dispatched Henry Morton Stanley to study the economic possibilities of the Congo. The next step was the formation in 1885 of the political organization called *Association Internationale du Congo*. When it was recognized by the European powers assembled at Berlin in 1885, it enabled the shadowy Congo State of Leopold II to assume a substantial form.³

In accordance with the Belgian constitution, Leopold II had to seek permission from his parliament to accept the crown of the Congo. Permission was reluctantly granted, on the distinct understanding that the connection between Belgium and the new state would be entirely personal through Leopold himself. The King of the Belgians thus also became sovereign of the Congo Free State. He took absolute ownership over half its area, and a more veiled proprietorship of a further area around Lake Leopold. Within this territory the natural resources of the country were reserved for the exclusive exploitation of the State. Outside it, territorial concessions were granted to various monopoly companies for their exclusive exploitation.⁴

Leopold's main problem was how to secure enough revenue to meet the administrative needs of the new colonial state. He was an impatient man and did not believe in long-term return on investment. He sought quick returns for his money, and this—combined with his impatience and his contempt for Africans—was what resulted in the atrocities committed by the colonial administration of the Free State.⁵ The disclosure of these atrocities to world public opinion became the mission of two most unusual men, Roger Casement and E. D. Morel.

Although much has been written about the later career of Roger Casement (1864-1916), his extremely important role in the movement for the reform of administration of the Congo has not been fully appreciated.⁶ There are two obvious reasons for this. The personal tragedy surrounding Casement's execution for treason in 1916—as one of the principal Irish martyrs in the revolt against British rule in Ireland—has distracted attention from objective study of him as a humanitarian. Secondly, because of his official position as a member of the British consular service, his activities as a private individual had to be behind the scenes. He served as a British Consul for Mozambique, Angola, Congo Free State, and Brazil.

A study of documents now available reveals the crucial role of Roger Casement in the Congo Reform Association. The idea of organizing it originated from Casement—not from Morel as had been commonly accepted. The documents confirm that Casement worked actively in this society and contributed regularly to its coffers. If the Congo Reform

Association is to be accorded its place in modern history as the organ which roused the conscience of the world against the ruthless exploitation of African people, then the praise should go in large measure to Casement.⁷

Casement was Joseph Conrad's best friend in the Congo in 1890. Casement was of Irish and Conrad of Polish origin, so like Conrad he belonged to a persecuted nation. He also lost his parents when he was a child. Casement had joined the volunteers who worked for the Welsh-born American journalist and 'explorer' H. M. Stanley, whose ideas about central Africa first attracted the attention of King Leopold to the Congo. It seems that Stanley did not realize for a good while what Leopold's real goals were, or the ruthless methods he was prepared to apply in his Congo Free State.

Only in about 1890 did Western travellers and missionaries visiting the Congo begin to become uneasy about what they saw as the inhuman methods of the colonial administration there. One of the earliest to start an open attack was the black American historian, George Washington Williams, who came to the Congo in 1890 and then began to publish startling denunciations of the colonial system. It was the same year as Casement first met Conrad in the Congo: they, too, like Williams, were shocked by what they found there. Also in 1890, an American missionary working in the Congo, John B. Murphy, dispatched the following text which throws much light upon the situation of Africans in the Congo:

Each town and district is forced to bring in a certain quantity [of rubber] to the headquarters of the Commissionaire every Sunday. It is collected by force; the soldiers drive the people into the bush. If they will not go, they are shot down, and their hands cut off and taken as trophies to the Commissaire... these hands, the hands of men, women and children are placed in rows before the Commissaire who counts them to see that the soldiers have not wasted cartridges.⁸

A few years later, Casement's friend the journalist E. D. Morel wrote that

the carnival of massacre, of which the Congo territories have been the scene for the last twelve years, must appall all those who have studied the facts. From 1890 onwards the records of the Congo State have been literally bloodsoaked... [there were] atrocities committed upon young children by the State's soldiers and the 'prime movers'...in this diabolic and unholy so-called civilising power are actuated, we are told, by sincere love for their fellow-men and black brothers.⁹

Roger Casement, E. D. Morel and their Congo Reform Association uncovered the exploitative character of the Congo Free State and Leopold's ruthless methods. It was Casement's report on the Congo, worked up in 1903 for the British government, that gave the most complete analysis of the situation in that hell for Africans. Casement reported from the interior of the Congo on 5 August 1903:

In the lake district things are pretty bad... whole villages and districts I knew well and visited as flourishing communities in 1887 are today without a human being; others are reduced to a handful of sick and harassed creatures who say of the government: Are the white men never going home; is this to last forever?¹⁰

One month later, Casement wrote to Lord Landsdowne in still more accusatory and condemnatory terms:

Of all the shameful and infamous expedients whereby man has preyed upon man... this vile thing [the rubber trade—HZ] dares to call itself commerce... were I to touch on the subject of the treatment of the natives under the rubber regime, my indignation would carry me beyond the limits of official courtesy.¹¹

At the beginning of September 1903 Casement came across bodily mutilation which made a most terrible impression on him. A group of Africans came to see him at the Congo Balolo mission of the Baptist Missionary Society. They brought with them a boy of about sixteen whose right hand had been cut off at the wrist by a 'sentry' of one of the rubber companies—to compel workers to collect more wild rubber.

Within two weeks, Roger Casement had produced for the British Foreign Office a sixty-one-page record of his journey up the Congo River, replete with documentary evidence—giving shocking proof of atrocities committed by the Congo Free State authorities and by white traders in that country. The report was to give him international fame for revealing to the world such atrocious cruelty in the exploitation of African labour by European colonists.

In his book published the next year, *King Leopold's Rule in Africa*, Morel substantiated Casement's findings with many examples of mutilation and a horrifying picture of colonial cruelty. He disclosed that systematic hand-cutting and worse forms of mutilation had been practised all over the Congo territories for more than a decade. The mutilation of the dead and of the living

must be assigned to the direct instigation of State officials and agents of the Trusts appointed to terrorise the rubber districts. The soldiers let loose through the country... have been required to bring back tangible proof that proper punishment was inflicted, and the hands of slain, or partly slain, people were the readiest and most acceptable form of proof.¹²

Edmund D. Morel (1873-1924), Casement's friend and collaborator, was one of England's most powerful pamphleteers and effective reformers of the time.¹³ Son of a French civil servant and an English mother, he was educated in England where he became a prolific writer and journalist. He dedicated several years to revealing atrocities in the Congo, and his books remain very important sources of information. He founded the Congo Reform Association together with Casement and became the soul of that movement which stirred the humanitarian conscience of the English people at the very beginning of the twentieth century.

Morel first heard of the nightmare of the Congo from Casement:

the agony of the entire people...in all the repulsive terrifying details. I verily believe—wrote Morel—I saw those hunted women clutching their children and flying panic stricken to the bush; the blood flowing from those quivering bodies as the hippopotamus hide whip struck and struck again; the savage soldiery rushing hither and thither amid burning villages; the ghastly tally of several hands... later on...we

turned again to that tortured African world, to the 'heart of darkness', as Joseph Conrad described it in his memorable story.¹⁴

Morel started to collect evidence to bring those crimes to light in 1890. In 1896 he wrote in his *History of the Congo Reform Movement* that he had started to work

with the determination to do my best to expose and destroy what I then knew to be a legalised infamy. I knew that there lay concealed beneath the mask of a spurious philanthropy, and framed in all the misleading paraphernalia of civilised government, a perfected system of oppression, accompanied by unimaginable barbarities and responsible for a vast destruction of human life¹⁵

In the preface to *King Leopold's Rule in Africa* (1904), Morel confessed that by 1899 he had become convinced

that the system of government carried on by authorities of the Congo state was a bad and wicked system, inflicting terrible wrongs upon the native races, and that the conception of tropical African development upon which it rested was one that ought to be struggled against without pause or abatement of energy in the interest of humanity, of European honour, and European statesmanship in the Dark Continent.¹⁶

Morel was an excellent organizer and agitator, and also a hard-working researcher. He compiled an enormous amount of data and documentation about the mismanagement of the Congo by its colonial administration. He not only saw the individual wrongs inflicted by Europeans upon African people, but also grasped the whole nature of European expansion and exploitation. He condemned the system of forced labour and forced production, and identified two essential characteristics: denial to the natives of any rights to their land, and denial to the natives of any income from commercial products produced on their land. To which he added, physical force to compel the Africans to gather those products for the Europeans.

Morel wrote that the colonial exploitation was an old story of evil, greed and lust perpetrated upon a weaker people. But never before has

the hypocrisy with which such deeds have been cloaked, attained to heights so sublime. Never before has hypocrisy been so successful. For nearly twenty years has the Sovereign of the Congo State posed before the world as the embodiment of philanthropic motive, high intent, humanitarian zeal, lofty and stimulating righteousness. No more marvellous piece of acting has been witnessed on the world's stage than this.¹⁷

The British Government responded cautiously to the publication of Casement's 1903 Congo Report. The Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, realised that it would make 'a great noise in England'. But discussion in England, much to the embitterment of Casement, concentrated on the form in which the report was published. He had tried to publish the names of the oppressors and the oppressed, but the British Government had vetoed this on the grounds that it could expose the victims and witnesses of persecutions to the

risk of reprisals. When at last the Report was published on 12 February 1904 it had letters and symbols substituted for names and places.¹⁸

Casement's Report and the creation of the Congo Reform Association by Casement and Morel contributed greatly to the eventful downfall of the Leopoldian system and the annexation of the Congo by Belgium. They mobilized public opinion in Britain against a colonial system which Joseph Conrad had also very strongly condemned in his *Heart of Darkness*.

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as anti-colonial literature

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924)'s traditional image in literary history has been that of a sea-dreamer, and recognition as a political writer took a long time coming.¹⁹ We may also see him as a 'colonial' writer, because colonial themes play an enormous role in his writings such as *Heart of Darkness*, *Victory*, *Nostromo* and *The Rescue*.

Conrad made English literature more mature and reflective because he called attention to the sheer horror of political realities overlooked by English citizens and politicians. The case of Poland, his oppressed homeland, was one such issue. The colonial exploitation of Africans was another. His condemnation of imperialism and colonialism, combined with sympathy for its persecuted and suffering victims, was drawn from his Polish background, his own personal sufferings, and the experience of a persecuted people living under foreign occupation. Personal memories created in him a great sensitivity for human degradation and a sense of moral responsibility. Conrad's moral and political sensitivity caused Henry James to write him the following:

No one has known—for intellectual use—the things you know... you have, as the artist of the whole matter, an authority that no one has approached.²⁰

In all the fiction written about Africa at the turn of the nineteenth century in Britain, only the work of Joseph Conrad stands as great literature. By comparison with Rudyard Kipling and his followers, Conrad was keenly aware of the moral ambiguities of empire. He described imperialism as 'robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale', and thus took the opposite view to Kipling's jingoistic celebration. Conrad saw very clearly the real nature of imperialism. In the *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz goes to Africa for the sake of loot, and thus becomes a great literary symbol for the decadence of colonialism and international imperialism.

Heart of Darkness is based on Conrad's experience in the Congo in 1890 when he commanded a river steamer and met Roger Casement. During his short stay in the Congo, only six months, Conrad did not have much opportunity to personally witness much Belgian brutality and oppression.²¹ But it is the peculiar ability of a great writer to understand and depict, even on the basis of scanty evidence, the whole dimension and nature of things.

Conrad's direct experience of ivory trading on the Congo river above Kinshasa was limited to a rapid voyage to Stanley Falls and back. There was probably little time for shore experience. But Conrad kept eyes and ears well

open, both in Africa and England, and it seems that a great deal must have come to him from hearsay. Apart from Casement, his sources were traders, missionaries and English friends both in Britain and in Africa, who spoke freely about the brutality of the colonial system in the Congo.

One cannot deny that Conrad's presentation of African realities may have been distorted by such brief firsthand experience. But *Heart of Darkness* is a literary masterpiece, not a historical or political study. Chinua Achebe, in my opinion, has overemphasised the fact that Conrad pictured up so many contemporary attitudes towards Africa in Europe and from Europeans, rather than in Africa and from Africans.²² Conrad's personal journey upstream to the 'heart of darkness' probably did not bring him face to face with the realities of the Congo Free State. Conrad learnt most about these realities from Casement, from literature and from other sources, rather than from his own experience.²³ Conrad was not a politician or a journalist. He was looking for moral and artistic truth about the human condition, rather than documenting what he had found in the Congo.

Conrad's critique of conditions in the Congo was strengthened by stories he heard in England about the mismanagement of affairs in King Leopold's Congo. Protest and agitation about the Congo started in 1898, when Conrad was already settled in England, after a long life at sea, and was now sketching his *Heart of Darkness*. The protest and agitation took off after an incident in the Congo Free State in 1895, which became famous as the 'Stokes Affair'.

Charles Stokes, an Irish missionary turned trader, was executed by order of a Belgian captain named Hubert Lothaire, known among Africans as the 'murderer for ivory'. The official pretext given for the execution was that Stokes was supplying guns to a powerful Afro-Arab slaver. But British public opinion did not accept this explanation. There was an outcry which pressured the Congo Free State into paying an indemnity to the British government and bringing Captain Lothaire to trial.²⁴

The Stokes Affair made a deep impression on Conrad who, like many British citizens, saw in Stokes a victim of Belgian colonial rule. Some echo of Conrad's feelings over this affair can be glimpsed in *The Inheritors*, a novel written by him together with Ford Madox Ford in 1899.²⁵ The villain of the book was an allegorical representation of the British imperialist Joseph Chamberlain. The sub-villain was Leopold II, King of the Belgians. *The Inheritors* was written at the beginning of the Boer War, which was widely regarded as 'Chamberlain's War' because of his aggressive colonial policies as Colonial Secretary. Conrad opposed Chamberlain and scoffed at Kipling over the war. He mocked Kipling's assertion that it was a war undertaken in the cause of democracy, and correctly believed that it was 'an appalling fatuity'.²⁶

Conrad must have also known the writings of Charles Dilke, a former Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs in Britain, who in 1896 had written bitterly about conditions in the Congo—ivory-stealing, village-burning, flogging and shooting in the heart of Africa. Dilke's article appeared in the July issue of *Cosmopolis*, a magazine sponsored by Conrad's publisher. And

Conrad also recalled the words of the late General Gordon of Khartoum: 'I am sick of these people [white colonialists]; it is they and not the blacks, who need civilisation'.

English traders who worked in the Congo State could also have supplied Conrad with knowledge of tropical Africa. In September 1896 several English newspapers published a Reuter's interview with Alfred Parminter; and in 1897 the *Century Magazine* published the diary of E. J. Glave under the title 'Cruelty in the Congo State'. They both stressed the fact that the Congo State employed 'Arabs' to raid villages, to take slave hostages and return them for ivory.

Conrad's memories of an unfortunate childhood created in him great sensitivity for human degradation and moral responsibility.²⁷ His Polish cultural heritage may account for, not only his liberalness of spirit, but also his extraordinarily humane and keen awareness of realities in countries dominated by foreigners. In his *Personal Record* Conrad wrote:

An impartial view of humanity in all its degree of splendour and misery together with a special regard for the rights of the unprivileged of this earth, not on any mystic ground but on the ground of simple fellowship and honourable reciprocity of services, was the dominant characteristic of the mental and moral atmosphere of the houses which sheltered my hazardous childhood...²⁸

Conrad's Polishness is the key to and the source of better understanding of many aspects of his art, including his African novella. The racial stereotypes in his descriptions of Africans were traditional opinions about Africa that Conrad came across in England.²⁹

The multiform and multiple structure of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in which the action can be seen as taking place on different levels and having different meanings, makes the interpretation of this novella especially difficult. The novella has a complex structure, and some parts may be understood in more than one way—cultural-historical, moral, literal, symbolic, psychological, etc. The cultural-historical and political level of interpretation is most fruitful. Conrad himself encourages this perspective by writing in the introduction to his *Youth* that '*Heart of Darkness*... is experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case'.

Conrad also told his publisher, William Blackwood,³⁰ that his African novella was the criticism of the 'criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness' of a colonialism which, under the guise of 'civilising work', so often brought misery and suffering to Africans.

Conrad came to believe that the true nature of European society was revealed in the colonies; and that they were a good test of character for Europeans. Here it may be appropriate to quote Karl Marx who also noted that 'the profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilisation lies unveiled before our eyes...in the colonies, where it goes naked'³¹ Jean-Paul Sartre reached a similar conclusion when he wrote that 'the strip-tease

of our humanism' took place in the tropics, and 'in the colonies the truth stood naked'.³²

Conrad shared with Marx and Sartre the notion that in the colonies one could see the truth about Western society stripped bare. Conrad not only understood that the true nature of Western society at that time was revealed in the colonies, but from his Congo experience came to believe that it was his duty as a novelist to unmask that truth. He began by grumbling about the stupidity of packing ivory in crates, but gradually came to attack the colonial set-up as a whole.

Heart of Darkness, like *Nostramo*, shows that the 'civilizing' mission of European imperialism was nothing more than barbarism.³³ *Heart of Darkness* is one of the most revealing indictments of imperialism ever written. It reveals that the interests of civilization and the interests of colonialism were basically antagonistic, although Conrad found some justification for British imperialism in its 'efficiency' and its imperial 'idea'.³⁴ Marlow is suggesting as much in *Heart of Darkness* when he is made to say "what saves us [British colonialists—HZ] is efficiency". The whole venture of imperialism was justified by its bringing of a greater efficiency to the lands under its sway.³⁵ Here Marlow reflects popular feeling in Britain of confidence in the superiority of its colonial administration.

In his study entitled *Criticism and Ideology* (1976), Terry Eagleton writes that while Conrad denounces 'crudely unidealistic forms of imperialism, he is ideologically constrained to discover in the British variant a saving idea—a Romantic commitment to the welding of politically amorphous tribal society into truly "organic" units'.³⁶ But, at the same time, Conrad reminds us, through the mouth of Marlow in the *Heart of Darkness*, that England had once too been one of the 'dark' places of the earth: 'darkness was here yesterday'.

Roger Casement, Edmund D. Morel and Joseph Conrad did more than anybody else to disclose colonial atrocities in the Congo, and thereby contributed largely to the downfall of the Leopoldian colonial system there. They shared a conviction in common—condemnation of colonial exploitation.³⁷

Notes & References

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- 29.I think that Chinua Achebe is too harsh to Conrad in his opinion that the author of *Heart of Darkness* saw the relationship between White and Black only in terms of remote kinship. Achebe is committing the 'sin of anachronism' in demanding from Conrad our contemporary knowledge and experience: *Heart of Darkness* was written at the end of the nineteenth century. See Achebe, 'An image of Africa', 1-15.
- 30.Hay, *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad*, 120.
- 31.K. Marx, 'The future results of British Rule in India', *On Colonialism* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 88.
- 32.J. P. Sartre's Preface to F. Fanon, *The Wretched on the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 7, 21.
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